

Yonkers Gang Takedown
Prepared Remarks for U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara
August 9, 2011

Good afternoon. My name is Preet Bharara, and I am the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

Today, we announce the largest joint federal-local law enforcement action in memory in Yonkers, New York. We have taken this dramatic step because we all believe that the citizens of Yonkers – the fourth-largest city in the state – deserve to live in communities free from gangs and drugs and the inevitable violence that comes with both.

So, today we unseal five indictments charging a total of 65 defendants with a litany of serious federal crimes in Yonkers. Among the charges are allegations of trafficking in crack cocaine that was both large-scale and long-term. In addition, we allege gun trafficking; armed robbery; the use and discharge of firearms during the narcotics conspiracies; and even murder.

Today's law enforcement action focused largely, but not exclusively, on two violent gangs – the Elm Street Wolves and the Cliff Street Gangsters. As alleged, members and associates of these two gangs brazenly peddled crack in Yonkers neighborhoods both day and night. To maintain and enhance their power, many engaged in a campaign of violent intimidation and ruthless retaliation – a campaign that included beatings, shootings, and armed robberies. And at least one young man was killed in the crossfire.

And so in light of the widespread threat and use of gun violence, fifty-two of these defendants are charged with federal firearms offenses in addition to drug crimes. What does that mean? It means that those defendants, if convicted, will face lengthy mandatory minimum sentences consecutive to what they face on any drug charges they are found guilty of.

And it means that everyone should be on notice that if you join a gang or deal drugs or engage in violence in Yonkers, you are facing federal time now.

Early this morning, hundreds of federal and local law enforcement officers arrested scores of alleged gang members and associates. As of now, 62 are in custody, and three of the defendants are still being sought. Law enforcement officers also executed court-authorized search warrants on 13 locations in Yonkers, and seized, among other things, cash, crack, marijuana, and a number of firearms.

Today's action would not have been possible without the work of the finest and most dedicated federal and local law enforcement personnel anywhere:

- the FBI, represented by Assistant Director-In-Charge of the New York Division Janice Fedarcy and Special Agent in Charge of the New York Division Diego Rodriguez;
- the Yonkers Police Department, represented by Commissioner Edmund Hartnett and Deputy Chief William Cave, Chief of Investigations.

Both the FBI and the Yonkers Police Department played a pivotal role in today's successful takedown, and I am grateful for their work on this and so many other significant investigations.

I am also joined here today by the team of dedicated agents, officers, and prosecutors responsible for the investigation and prosecution of the defendants arrested today. This includes FBI Supervisor Edward McCabe, the leader of the FBI's Westchester County Violent Crime Task Force, the unit responsible for this investigation and today's arrests; Special Agents Thomas MacDonald and Karma Smith, and Yonkers Detective Brian Menton of the Yonkers Police Department's Gang Unit, who were the primary agents responsible for this investigation.

I am also joined by Diane Gujarati, Chief of this Office's White Plains Division; Michael English, Deputy Chief of the White Plains Division, and Assistant United States Attorneys Andrew Bauer and Tim Kasulis, who are prosecuting this case.

I also want to give special thanks to the Westchester County Department of Public Safety – which is represented here by Commissioner George Longworth and Captain Christopher Calabrese – for their participation in the Violent Crimes Task Force.

Now, let me turn to some of the specific charges in the indictments:

The first indictment (U.S. v. Knowles, et al.) charges 47 members and associates of the Elm Street Wolves in 21 counts, alleging that Elm Street Wolves members and associates sold crack cocaine on the streets in Yonkers, New York, with the epicenter of their operation located at the intersection of Elm and Oak Streets. Its ringleader, we allege, is Stephen Knowles.

As described, the gang members worked together to peddle crack to drug customers twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week – providing a constant and uninterrupted flow of drug poison into the streets of Yonkers.

Certain members of the Elm Street Wolves, as described, did not hesitate to use violence to protect their drug territory and to intimidate anyone who stood in their way, including rival gang members. The Elm Street Wolves' chief rival was the Strip Boys, a gang that operated within the Schlobohm Housing Project just a few blocks away from Elm Street.

That rivalry had lethal consequences. On July 4, 2009, while most people were peacefully celebrating America's independence, gang members were creating their own deadly fireworks.

The events leading to the charged murder of Christopher Cokley on July 4, 2009 typify the sort of senseless gang warfare that we are trying to stop with actions like those we've taken today.

As described in the indictment, a little over two years ago on July 4th, members of the Strip Boys came to Elm Street where they encountered a member of the Elm Street Wolves named Michael Clemons. The Strip Boys beat, pistol-whipped, and robbed him.

As further described, shortly thereafter, Steven Knowles, the chief enforcer of the Elm Street Wolves, drove to the Schlobohm Housing Project with fellow gang members. After spotting the rival Strip Boys, Knowles and another member of the gang went on a shooting rampage -- one that left Christopher Cokley dead and another young man wounded. Cokley was just 20 years old.

Another of today's indictments (U.S. v. Hardy, et al.) charges 12 members and associates of the Cliff Street Gangsters. It tells a similar story of drug dealing and gang warfare.

All 12 defendants in that indictment are alleged to have conspired to distribute crack and marijuana, including a type of high-grade marijuana known as purple haze. The Indictment alleges that the Cliff Street Gangsters operated within one block of Cliff Street between Elm Street and Spruce Street in Yonkers.

Like the Elm Street Wolves, the Cliff Street Gangsters were allegedly engaged in a long-running, violent dispute with the Strip Boys as well as another gang within the Schlobohm Housing Project known as GMF -- whose full name I cannot say aloud for reasons that will be apparent if you read the indictment.

Three other indictments charge six more defendants with narcotics and gun offenses.

Today's actions do not reflect any new law enforcement commitment -- rather, they reflect a longstanding and deeply-held belief that every community in the Southern District of New York should be safe and free from the poison of drugs, gangs, and violence. We who police the streets and prosecute criminals have no more important duty.

We will do everything we can to make good on that promise -- whether in the Bronx, in Manhattan, in Newburgh, Yonkers, or anywhere else in our jurisdiction.

- In fact, 21 months ago, I stood at this very podium with Commissioner Hartnett and the FBI to announce drug arrests of 43 people in a wide-ranging narcotics organization operating throughout Westchester. Every single one of those defendants has now been convicted and will serve federal jail time.
- Just 18 months ago, prosecutors from my Office -- including the chief of our criminal division Richard Zabel and chiefs in the White Plains office -- along with FBI agents met with Commissioner Hartnett to figure out ways to address the crime problem. There were many later meetings also. We pledged to do everything possible, working together, to make a significant impact.

We have done that today, but our work is far from finished. And I can promise that we will be back.